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## Chapter 1

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**M**ollie Sorensen was on a high and surveyed the dancers, thrilled. She felt triumphant. Her party was a great success. She tapped her foot to the beat of the music and waved her hand in salute to a friend in demonstrative cheerfulness, beaming with delight.

The party was in full swing on that Saturday night. The orchestra played on a podium in the stylish white marquee, on the large grounds of her Oxford home. It had been blazing its flamboyant music and pulsating its rhythms for the last three hours, from rumba to salsa and everything in-between. Everybody danced merrily under the quaint, colourful fairy lights hanging loose in the marquee and in the gardens. Thus, giving the party a warm glow and a fairytale vibe to it.

Her guests, in all their finery, looked like a picture in their elegant evening wear. Their dancing feet, on overdrive, were swinging to the tunes. The mood was vibrant; they were having a blast.

It was late August. The night was unfolding under a splendid starlit sky, with millions of stars beaming their silvery, mystical twinkles. A cool summer breeze gave everyone a truce from the heat of the season and the dance.

Food and drink were plentiful. She had set a cold and hot buffet up at the other end of the large marquee. Small tables gathered in its proximity for guests to rest and to have a bite in comfort.

She glanced at the couples twirling on the dance floor. Her eyes caught Fergus and Marguerite swaying sexily; any closer, the two would meld into one person.

*I have done that*, Mollie sighed, satisfied. She had a helping hand in matching that union.

She felt proud of herself for seeing them so cozy. If she had not followed her instinct, they would not be together, let alone be deliriously happy. The powerful Earl of Buckley himself, now a few months into the marriage, had given her a tender smile and ruffled her hair tonight. It was a testament to Fergus's contentment with his bride.

A satisfied grin formed on Mollie's lips, watching them so wrapped up in each other. It'd been a huge tick in the box for the dating app, not to mention she was ecstatic at their happiness after the bumpy start.

Her eyes moved on, and they landed on Finley and Kathryn as they twirled to the music, too. They were her special guests, whose official engagement they celebrated that night. The party was held in their honour; her friends got engaged a few months back, and she wished to do something special for them.

*I did that too*, she thought with a well-pleased glint in her eyes. Her best friend, Kathryn, had pined for Finley for almost a year, and if she had not given the man a push, the poor girl would still be waiting for the fellow to make a move. They were to set a wedding date soon. He could not wait to marry his girl, to make her his wife.

Mollie gave out a gigantic sigh of pleasure, purring like a cat. She grinned from ear to ear, gratified. She felt elated seeing people in love.

Her eyes darted to Erin Blake next, and her heart sank! A forceful hiss of irritation left her mouth instead.

Mollie muttered an oath under her breath when she saw her friend sitting at a table at the other end of the marquee. The woman had a soft drink in her hands, twirling it incessantly; she cut an odd, peculiar figure amongst the merriment, looking prim and wooden, despite her pretty demeanour.

Mollie had undertaken every effort to get her to the party.

Erin was tall and slender, a stunning brunette. But she was shy and rather awkward for someone so pretty, an introvert, but then she had a lot of issues. That night, to her hostess's bewilderment, Erin kept refusing every man who asked her to dance. Mollie rolled her eyes. She wished her friend relaxed, had fun, and enjoyed the festivities instead.

She had insisted with Dr. Stewart to give Erin his consent to leave the clinic to attend the party. It was only for a weekend, but it took her an entire month of insistence and begging before the doctor granted his permission. Erin was convalescing in his clinic, and he worried it may be too soon. Of course, the doctor had been invited too.

So, the previous day, Erin had set out by train to Oxford, but to persuade him to allow her to travel alone had been another palaver, the doctor not convinced she was ready for this, either. But Mollie was determined to get her way. Thus, he relented and allowed Erin to go ahead.

The busy doctor had only just arrived in time for the party instead. The plan was for them to stay in her home until Monday morning, when they would return together to the clinic.

Dr. Stewart spent most of the evening talking to Zac, Finley, Alex, and Fergus in turn.

Though, Mollie noticed, he kept giving furtive glances at Erin when he thought no one was looking. She wasn't sure if it was because Erin was a patient at his clinic and he wanted to keep an eye on her or if there was more to it. The doctor had not directed a single word to the girl since his arrival, though, which she found strange.

*Could it be? Dr. Stewart fancied Erin? And she? Who knew?*

*Um...*

She wasn't sure what to make of them. Was Erin well enough? Perhaps! This was a difficult situation, uncharted territory for her.

Erin had been in the clinic for four months now, and to all accounts, she was on the mend. Mollie and Kathryn had visited her often there, and in that time, despite their troubled past, a solid friendship had developed between the three girls.

Their distressful past put aside, it was forgiven and forgotten. It had been rather purging for the three women to do this. And once they crossed the first few awkward visits, a positive

understanding replaced the tumultuous and complex past between them instead. A friendship had blossomed.

So, that night, it pained Mollie to see her friend like this, cutting a sad figure amid a cheerful party.

*Nothing I can do about it*, she thought with a heavy sigh. Or could she? She liked a challenge; she relished them. She was pensive for a while. Though Erin and Dr. Stewart were a puzzle to her, both so reserved, so restrained.

Mollie had to be careful. Dr. Stewart was an eminent doctor, older than most of her friends, and too serious. She didn't know him that well; he was Zac's friend.

She groaned. A booming roar reached her ears from the dance floor, distracting her, *George!* She recognised his bass, sonorous laugh. She spun to him and grinned. His roaring laugh was contagious. It echoed over the loud music in the marquee. She observed him.

*George and Imelda, another puzzle.* They were swinging and swaying their hips, their eyes locked on one another. They so obviously cared for each other. Undeniable! She felt the sexy heat emanating from them as they danced. She smiled.

*Look at them.* The way they flirted was wonderful to watch. Yes, she was right. But as she studied her young friends, she mused about them too. They were not a couple yet, why?

*I must talk to Imelda on this, one of these days, but she is not my priority tonight. She can look after herself. First things first...*

That evening, Mollie decided she had other priorities. *Why can't Erin flirt with Dr. Stewart, like Imelda flirts with George?* She was sure sparks would fly, if only the woman would let herself go. She contemplated her conundrum, but she was at a loss.

"Zac, darling," Mollie beamed at her husband when she felt his arm circle around her waistline, thus interrupting her musings.

"Hey, what are you doing here in the corner watching everyone? Umm... You look like a queen studying her subjects." Zac struggled to be heard over the hubbub of the party as she followed the motion of his lips to match the words. He gave her a peck on the lips and taking her, he encouraged her to follow him out of the marquee into the garden where the music was not so loud.

"Are you enjoying tonight?" she asked.

"A wonderful party, you've done a great job. Kat and Finley are thrilled with the celebration."

"Aha! A beautiful couple. So happy, aren't they?" she mumbled, but she was a little distracted as they stopped and she looked back.

"Who are you staring at, ah?" Zac scoffed, trying to see who was absorbing his wife's attention. Mollie was still glancing towards the marquee through the open sides.

"Do you think Dr. Stewart likes Erin?"

"What?" Her husband wondered what she was on about now.

"You heard me. He keeps looking at her. Is he doing it because she is under his care, because he is her doctor, or is there something else? You know him best. What do you think?"

"Well, I guess so, she is in his care. You are not planning something, are you?"

"Me? No, of course not." *We'll see, umm... who knows? They are staying the weekend after all, and Erin is my priority.*

"I told you, Mollie, you mustn't meddle with people."

"I am not doing anything, Zac. I am observing, that's all."

"Exactly what I am afraid of."

"Don't be silly!"

"Now, dance with me!" He took her by the elbow, trying to move her along.

"Yes, I will. In a minute. Hold on, the doctor is in the garden, and Erin is at the table, alone..." And she was off instead in an instant, doing her own bidding.

"Where are you going—" her husband huffed and rolled his eyes.

Mollie moved towards the doctor, strolling in the grounds.

"Dr. Stewart, are you enjoying yourself?" She gave him her most welcoming smile, and with her baby blue eyes wide, she looked innocent and cute.

"Lovely party, Mollie. Thank you for inviting me. Please, call me Marcus," Dr. Stewart said with a courteous nod of the head.

"Come, Marcus, you must dance. We don't want any lovely young ladies to be a wallflower at my party, do we?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Erin!"

"Ah?"

"You must dance with her. She's been twirling that soft drink in her hands all night. Please, ask her to dance, man," Mollie urged with a childish grin that was difficult to oppose. She took him by the elbow and steered him back towards the marquee.

"What is my girl asking you to do, Marcus?" Zac intercepted them. He raised an eyebrow to his wife, seeing a worried expression on his friend's face.

"Just asking him to dance with Erin, that's all," Mollie countered in all virtuosity, "Not a taxing request, is it? Look at her; she is so pretty," she concluded with her baby blue eyes so wide pleading with Marcus, and a little sweet pout formed on her lips.

"But he is her doctor," Zac replied with concern, and his body stood firm in front of them to stop their advance.

"Well, no... strictly speaking, I'm not," Dr. Stewart said. "Miss Blake is in my clinic, yes, but she is Dr. Devlin's patient. Julia is her doctor, not me. So, nothing wrong with me dancing with her," he went on and coughed, somewhat self-conscious at his own admission.

"See? I told you so!" Mollie launched a smile at her husband. "Then go, Marcus. Erin's been sitting there for ages. No one asked her to dance all night," she lied. "Go save the day."

Dr. Stewart had been observant. He raised an elegant brow at his hostess, knowing full well the stunning brunette had had a string of fellows asking her for a dance, but no one seemed to have satisfied her enough to accept.

Mollie bumped him with her shoulder on his chest, encouraging him to go. She waved her hands, shooing him off while he made his way to Erin.



## A Creature of Spirit

She stood there. She watched Marcus approach the woman, and she was only satisfied when he led Erin to the dance floor.

"Now, I can dance with you, darling!" Mollie smiled, turning to her husband with a love-struck expression.

"You are impossible, babe," Zac scoffed with a shake of his head, an amused twinkle in his eyes.

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